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ABSTRACT

To help teachers and administrators of American Sign Language (ASL) design and implement effective ASL programs, this Digest answers questions about ASL and the essential components of an ASL program, including ASL course design, methods and approaches for teaching ASL as a second language, and ASL instructional materials. (nine references) (VWL)

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Teaching ASL as a Second Language

ERIC Digest
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ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
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Teaching ASL as a Second Language

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This Digest is based on the monograph, *Learning To See: American Sign Language as a Second Language* (1991), available from Regents Prentice Hall, Mail Order Processing, 200 Old Tappan Road, Old Tappan, NJ 07675 (201) 767-5937.

Interest in American Sign Language (ASL) is at an all-time high. Throughout the 1980s, ASL programs were established on college campuses and in high schools across the country. As soon as one course was established, there were enough students to fill two. If two classes were opened, enough students showed up to fill four.

The sudden popularity and acceptance of a previously neglected language was heartening for language teachers who had been in the field of ASL for many years. The field was not fully prepared, however, to meet the rapidly increasing demand for ASL instruction. There were few teacher training programs; there was a paucity of instructional materials, no standard curricula, little or no literature on teaching ASL as a second language, and no accreditation procedures for ASL programs or teachers.

To help ASL teachers and administrators design and implement effective ASL programs, this Digest answers questions about ASL and the essential components of an ASL program, including ASL course design, methods and approaches for teaching ASL as a second language, and ASL instructional materials.

How Is ASL Different from Foreign Languages like Spanish and French?

Because of its signed modality, people often assume that ASL is fundamentally different from spoken languages, or that it is merely a contrived representation of English. In reality, ASL is a fully developed, natural language. It is not a derivative of English; ASL contains structures and processes that English does not (Klima & Bellugi, 1979). ASL is a complete language with its own unique grammar (Fromkin, 1988). It is a true human language, with all the features of other human languages. An abstract concept can be expressed in ASL as easily as in English, Spanish, Navajo, or any other spoken language.

The acceptance of ASL in fulfillment of foreign language requirements is being debated in school districts, universities, and state legislatures across the country. ASL is not foreign in a geopolitical sense--it is indigenous to the United States and parts of Canada. Other indigenous languages, such as Navajo, are generally accepted in fulfillment of a foreign language requirement. If the purpose of foreign language study is to introduce students to a language and culture they do not already know--that is, a language and culture that are foreign to their experience--ASL qualifies admirably.

What Are the Main Components of an ASL Program?

In addition to ASL language courses, where students learn to communicate using ASL, an ASL program should include a holistic introductory course about ASL and deafness, an ASL linguistics course, and a course in Deaf culture.

•*Holistic introductory course.* Beginning students of ASL usually need to unlearn stereotyped myths and misconceptions about ASL and deafness. They need a "safe" environment in which to ask questions, in spoken English, about deafness, the Deaf community, hearing-impaired individuals, and the use of signed languages.

•*ASL linguistics.* This course should be offered soon after students have begun to acquire syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic concepts in the ASL classroom. It should include a discussion of the basic phonological and morphological aspects of ASL, which are, of course, visual/gestural rather than aural/oral. It is also important for ASL students to be aware of the major sociolinguistic issues in the Deaf community, such as the variation and language outcome resulting from contact between ASL and English.

•*Deaf culture.* Respect for and understanding of Deaf culture should be cultivated in the classroom. Some of the Deaf cultural mores and behaviors that can be taught include introductions, leave-taking, conversational turn-taking, language code-switching, criteria for acceptance or non-acceptance in the culture, folklore, group norms, identity, and so forth.

What Teaching Methods Work Best with ASL?

In recent years, ASL programs and teachers have begun to apply recognized methodological strategies from the second language learning field to the teaching of ASL. Various methodologies and approaches can be used.

Signing Naturally, a widely-used standardized ASL curriculum developed by Vista Community College (CA) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, is based on the *functional/notional* approach. This approach places major emphasis on the communicative purpose of speech acts--or *functions*--of a language: introducing people to one another, requesting information, extending an invitation, directing someone to do or not to do something, describing a book, and so forth.

Other effective approaches, many of which are used as substrategies by the *Signing Naturally* program,

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include the following:

•*Role playing* can be used to promote simplified interactive exchanges between students. The speed of signing, although fluent, is recognizably slower than normal conversation between ASL native signers.

•*Episodic hypothesis* suggests that any text or discourse will be easier to recall and understand if it is episodically organized (Oller & Richard-Amato, 1983). An episodic lesson can be as simple as having students describe what they see in a picture, what they think happened immediately before the picture, and what happened immediately thereafter. Discussion focuses not only on the correct usage of ASL, but also on the story sequencing.

•The *cognitive approach* attempts to organize materials around a grammatical syllabus while allowing for meaningful practice and use of language (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). It emphasizes understanding and encourages the conscious selection of grammatical forms.

•*Spiraling* assists students in acquiring language concepts. "Materials or skills are taught in increasingly greater depth at each succeeding level of instruction" (Baker & Cokely, 1980, p. 183).

Some methods of second language instruction include a silent period during which the learners are not required to speak and are allowed to rehearse silently. ASL courses frequently offer visual preparation exercises before expecting students to produce signs accurately. Hearing students are auditorily attuned to their environment and need a transition period to help them become visually oriented.

Most language acquisition and teaching theorists now support a holistic view of second language learning in which teachers are sensitive to the individual needs of students rather than to any dominant language methodology (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Before deciding which approaches to use, ASL teachers, like all second language teachers, should learn who their students are and why they want to learn the language.

What Kinds of Instructional Materials Are Used To Teach ASL?

To be truly effective, ASL programs should have high-quality video recording and playback facilities, a video language lab equipped with a large collection of ASL and Deaf culture videotapes, and facilities for students to view tapes on an individual basis. Other materials required are much the same as those needed in any language program.

•*Texts.* The National Association of the Deaf and T. J. Publishers offer several excellent textbooks for ASL. (For a comprehensive list, see Wilcox & Wilcox, 1991.)

•*Videotapes.* An excellent functional/notional approach to teaching ASL is provided in the *Signing Naturally* tape. Locally produced videotapes can be a good resource to supplement the ASL curriculum with local signed dialects and conversational topics not provided by commercially produced videotapes.

•*Objects and pictures.* Objects and pictures provide non-linguistic means of comprehension and encourage the use of "here-and-now" language. Examples include pictures of objects and actions; sequenced story line pictures; tinker toy construction sets (for teaching size and shape classifiers); building blocks of various shapes and colors; objects representing animals and people; and maps of countries and local geographical areas.

•*Flash cards.* Handshape flash cards can be used in exercises at the phonological level (Bahan & Paul, 1984), and in breakaway exercises during a class or lab session.

•*Computers.* Interactive videodisc has tremendous potential for use in ASL classrooms. Integrated combinations of hardware and software link images stored on a videodisc to a computer that is used to store the locations of video segments, do complex searches based on the student's input, and play the selected portion of the disc (Ambron & Hooper, 1990).

Conclusion

The study of ASL as a second language can be a culturally and linguistically rewarding experience. However, careful planning is essential to the development of an effective ASL program. There are many important considerations involved that have not been discussed here due to space limitations. These include teacher training, program administration, student assessment, and program articulation from the secondary to university levels. Detailed discussion of these issues can be found in Wilcox & Wilcox (1991) and in the other resources listed below.

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